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From: Smith, Paula
Sent: Tue 9/2/2014 6:12:31 PM
Subject: FW: Greenwire: 'Terrified' employees, 'beyond gross' vandalism in troubled regional office

fyi

- Paula

From: Johnson, Alisha
Sent: Thursday, August 21, 2014 11:33 AM
To: Mylott, Richard; Smith, Roxanne; McGrath, Shaun; Lee, Monica; KeyesFleming, Gwendolyn; Feldt, Lisa; Reynolds, Thomas; Purchia, Liz; Allen, Laura; Smith, Paula
Subject: Greenwire: 'Terrified' employees, 'beyond gross' vandalism in troubled regional office

EPA:

'Terrified' employees, 'beyond gross' vandalism in troubled regional office

Kevin Bogardus and Sam Pearson, E&E reporters

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Documents obtained by *Greenwire* show U.S. EPA's Region 8 office has been troubled by persistent bathroom misbehavior -- leading to heightened security and frightened employees.

The Denver office -- the butt of jokes when feces was found in a hallway earlier this year -- has been beset by roughly a dozen suspected instances of restroom shenanigans since late 2013, according to emails, memorandums and incident reports. Hundreds of pages of EPA records produced under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) show agency managers have investigated the incidents and tried to calm employees' nerves.

A memo by Deputy Regional Administrator Howard Cantor sent to Region 8 employees on Feb. 18 asked them to notify their superiors of any misbehavior.

"A couple of examples include an individual clogging the toilets with large amounts of paper towels and an individual placing feces in the hallway outside of one of the restrooms," Cantor wrote.

EPA spokeswoman Alisha Johnson told *Greenwire* today the agency has taken action to boost security in the Denver office.

"EPA's response to incidents that occurred months ago in our regional office in Denver focused on ensuring a safe work environment for our employees. We have taken deliberate steps to address these issues through communicating with managers and staff and updating security measures related to workplace and personnel matters," Johnson said.

The memo's call for more information flushed out a large number of strange complaints from employees. Feces were not Region 8's only problem.

The day after the memo went out, one EPA official said, "One of my employees refused to come into the office today because she is terrified after hearing a story on the train home last night."

"A male supervisor ... told her that management knows that it is a female on the [redacted] floor who has been wiping feces and menstrual blood on the walls (I'm really sorry, this is beyond gross) and that they are worried that her behavior is escalating," the official said in an email.

Misbehavior wasn't just limited to the restrooms.

"I had one employee report that her house keys were stolen off her desk on Jan. 31st and she had to have her locks changed -- she also said that 'this place is getting strange so I am going to apply for the buy out,'" said another official.

One worker raised two individuals as potential suspects for the bathroom troubles.

"One who under the context of emergency, defecated outside the building when precluded from coming into the building prior to 5:30 am and who sits on the [redacted] floor," the employee wrote in the message. "... And another, whose behavior was suspicious when ammunition was found on the person, their car was parked on the side of the building, and they had been observed kicking the front door."

One chain of emails pegs the first restroom incident occurring in December 2013 with someone urinating on the toilet seat and the floor.



An EPA image of a clogged toilet that was obtained by *Greenwire* under the Freedom of Information Act. Photo courtesy of EPA.

There were reported problems in both sexes' restrooms but on Jan. 13, the ninth floor men's restroom had "a trail of poop leading out in hallway," according to the incident report.

Joel Dvoskin, a University of Arizona psychologist who works with the Threat Assessment Group, said for someone to do that intentionally is a serious act.

"They passed shame on the turnpike of life some time ago. That was an expression of rage, an act of extreme disrespect against management," said Dvoskin, an expert on workplace violence. "I would be very concerned by that act. Whatever else is going on with that person, they are probably pretty angry."

EPA workers tried to help Region 8 managers, saying they could offer advice after having seen similar problems in other agency offices. One even took a photo of a toilet clogged with paper towels to help with the investigation, which was obtained by *Greenwire* under FOIA.

Overall, there were several instances of bad bathroom behavior, as Cantor states in his memo.

Included at the end of the email chain is a list of at least nine suspected restroom incidents. Problems stretched to the summer with a toilet overflowing in a men's bathroom this June, according to an incident report.

Employees in Region 8 may have begun telling their bosses more of what they found in the bathroom after Cantor's memo. That could have equated general powder room untidiness with malevolent acts. Some employees even reported unflushed toilets to their superiors.

"I'm not sure if it was malicious, but I just saw that there is an unpleasant situation in the left stall in the men's room," an EPA employee said in an email.

Security ramps up

Cantor's memo got Region 8 employees talking about their worries about safety, leading some officials to call for tighter security.

Cantor quickly agreed, saying "please increase the frequency of patrols" in an email a day after his memo was sent out.

That soon became an official request to the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Protective Service for "the number of patrols [to] be increased immediately."

EPA spokeswoman Johnson said the patrols continue in the Denver office.

"EPA adjusted building patrol schedules to ensure a more frequent and consistent presence throughout the building. Those schedules remain in place," she said.

DHS was also in touch with EPA over the incidents. One Homeland Security official wrote in a March 3 email that "we are going to do a report and push it up to our Special Agents to see if they can provide any assistance in investigating this matter."

DHS's involvement in the restroom probe makes sense because its Federal Protective Service protects federal facilities and provides security.

"DHS played a limited role in assisting us in our review of the incidents," Johnson said.

EPA employees felt that more security was necessary at the office after the bathroom incidents. One worker said all EPA officials should have to walk through the magnetometer when entering the building, considering the misbehavior may foreshadow a greater threat.

Dvoskin urged caution, saying angry workers behind the bathroom problems are not necessarily prone to violence.

"Evidence of a troubled, angry employee would be a concern to me, but not all angry employees are violent," Dvoskin said. "Many people are angry who don't act violent."

Did the vandalism stop?

EPA officials have been at odds on when the bathroom troubles ceased, according to internal emails.

In a June 25 email, Region 8 Administrator Shaun McGrath told EPA chief of staff Gwendolyn Keyes Fleming and Tom Reynolds, EPA's head of communications, that the incidents ceased once Cantor issued his memo.

"It is also worth noting that after Howard's memo went out -- which confronted the behavior head on as Dr. Nicoletti advised -- the inappropriate behavior stopped," McGrath said.

McGrath was referring to John Nicoletti, co-founder of Nicoletti-Flater Associates and a workplace violence expert who has been consulting for EPA.

Yet it seems the incidents may have continued past the Feb. 18 memo, according to emails between Nicoletti and an EPA official.

"It hasn't stopped and we haven't identified a subject yet," the official said in a Feb. 23 reply to Nicoletti's query if the situation had improved. In another string of emails, the same official told Nicoletti about clogged toilets and urine on the bathroom floor since the memo was sent out.

Nicoletti referred *Greenwire* to EPA regarding the inappropriate behavior at Region 8.

Johnson said that the bathroom mishaps stopped soon after Cantor sent out his memo.

"Incidents indicative of the inappropriate behavior stopped within approximately one week of the issuance of the February memo," she said.

'There are news cameras out front'

Cantor's memo would leak to the press months later. *Government Executive* reported on the document first before news outlets across the country followed suit.

With the discovery of feces in a hallway, the story became a headline writer's dream and a headache for top agency brass.

McGrath soon tasked EPA officials to draft a statement in response to the story and coordinate with staff at agency headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"This has gone viral on internet and they are getting a lot of calls," the Region 8 administrator wrote in an email.

But the Denver office found itself under siege from media attention. Press calls and FOIA requests began to come in to Region 8 after Cantor's memo went public. Television news took notice as well.

"There are news cameras out front," one agency official said in an email.

Cantor would later send out the *Government Executive* story to the region's employees and asked them to direct queries to agency representatives.

"Please feel free to send any inquiries from media, stakeholders and partners, or the general public on this matter to Paula Smith and Rich Mylott," Cantor wrote.

Both Smith and Mylott work in Region 8's press office.

Bathroom vandal still at large?

EPA couldn't comment on whether the culprit for the bathroom incidents had been caught.

"EPA cannot comment on the details of pending personnel matters. We have been and will remain deliberate in responding to any incidents that represent a concern to the well-being of our employees or property," Johnson said.

Dvoskin said EPA should find out who is behind the restroom misbehavior.

"The most important first step is to identify who did it," Dvoskin said. "A good investigation would be my first step as well as ask some employees about morale in the workplace."

Morale has been low at the agency, which has been battered by budget cuts and pay freezes along with the rest of the federal workforce.

Further, EPA has been under attack for several workplace scandals, from an employee watching pornography on the job to another impersonating a CIA spy. It has always been a popular target for Republican lawmakers as well who disagree with the agency's policies (*Greenwire*, June 26).

Dvoskin said that the party responsible for the incidents "must have expressed dissatisfaction in other contexts."

There could be serious consequences for individuals behind the restroom problems. In his original memo, Cantor said, "Management is taking this situation very seriously and will take whatever actions are necessary to identify and prosecute these individuals."

It's not clear whether that person has been found yet by EPA managers.

"The culprit has not been identified," an EPA official said in a June 26 response to rumors that he or she had been found.

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